



Plug in Path at Woodvale Park

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NEW IRISH ARCHITECTURE 25

AAI AWARDS 2010

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Edited by John O'Regan and Nicola Dearey

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NEW IRISH ARCHITECTURE 25

AAI AWARDS 2010

PLUG-IN PATH AT WOODVALE PARK

LID ARCHITECTURE with Building Initiative

How is it possible for citizens to initiate projects that would otherwise not be realised within the institutional and developer-driven mechanisms that shape the public spaces of cities like Belfast? A collaborative group of architects, urbanists and artists explored innovative methods of participatory design practice to realise the citizen-led urban regeneration of Woodvale Park, located in the socially and economically deprived area of the Upper Shankill in Belfast. A number of strategies and tools were developed to facilitate a process of negotiation with local residents (including young people), city authorities, local businesses and other stakeholders. These strategies included:

- making site interventions with architecture students from the University of Ulster;
- running a 2nd Year design project, and exhibiting the student work in the park;
- developing a board game to allow stakeholders participate in the processes of planning and creative thinking;
- workshops in the park and local schools;
- publishing a newspaper as a design-dissemination and feedback tool;
- building an interactive mobile exhibition model constructed of robust pieces that can be moved around and 'plugged in' to create various scenarios.

The micro-politics of this process resulted in a space where social, cultural and economic spheres overlap. The proposal was a strategy called the 'Plug-in Path' – a programmed surface containing lighting, tiered seating, electricity, and water supplies. Events-organisers and participants could 'plug in' to these services to support activities like outdoor cinema, concerts, markets, etc. This also allows an incremental development of the site as a number of additional programmes – for example, community gardens, kiosk, large translucent roof, multi-purpose games area, pavilion, etc – plug in to this path as funding becomes available. This temporal strategy also allows trust in the project to develop gradually and for it to adapt and respond to changing social dynamics.

Although the participants had originally proposed a 'building' with facilities that would address the park's inadequacies and social problems, it emerged from the process that a landscape strategy was more appropriate and could 'activate the space without the weighty apparatus of traditional space-making'. The decision to work with the condition of uncertainty rather than resisting it resulted in a strategy of deliberate programmatic indeterminacy, allowing the proposal to respond to change, transformation and adaptation.

address – Upper Shankill Road, Belfast

client – Friends of Woodvale Park

+ residents of Upper Shankill

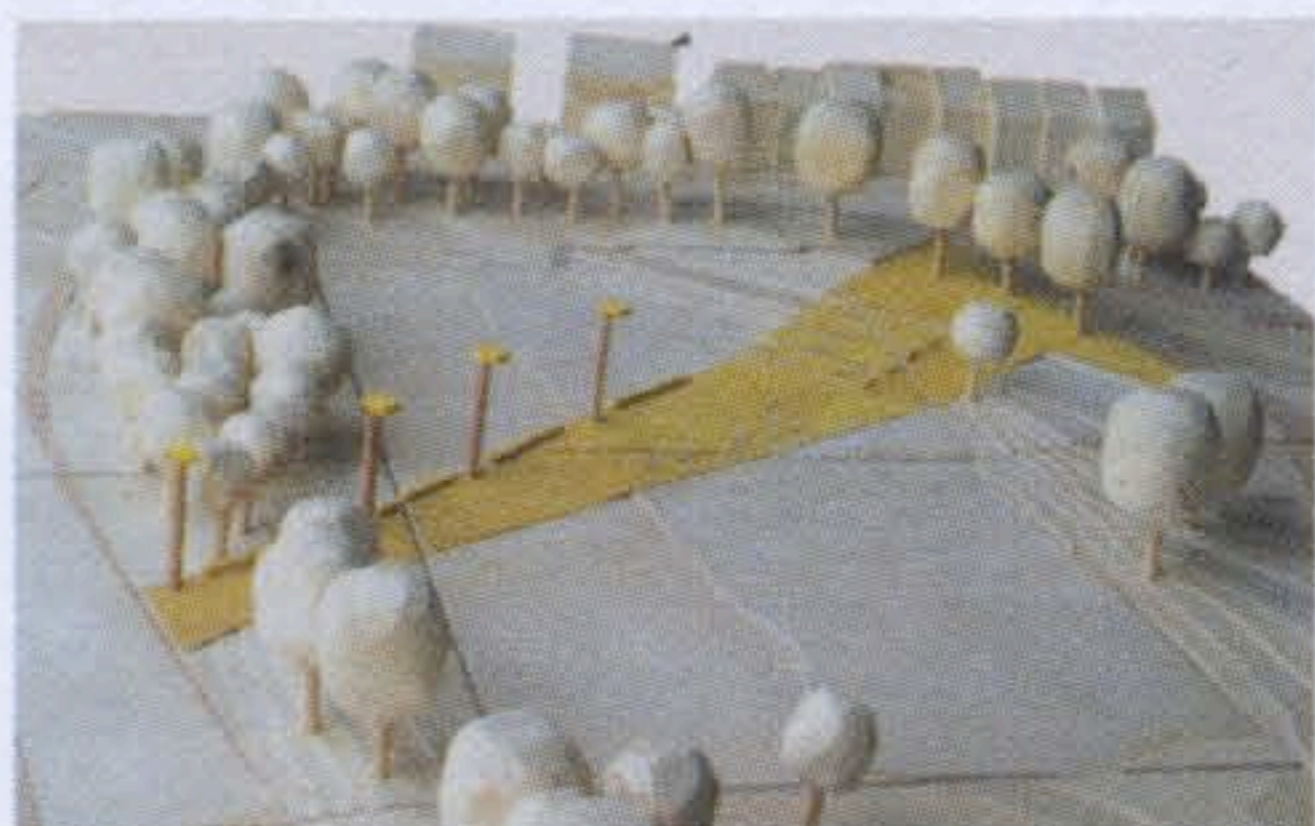
status – at planning stage / capital funding recd.

area – 2,000-6,000m²

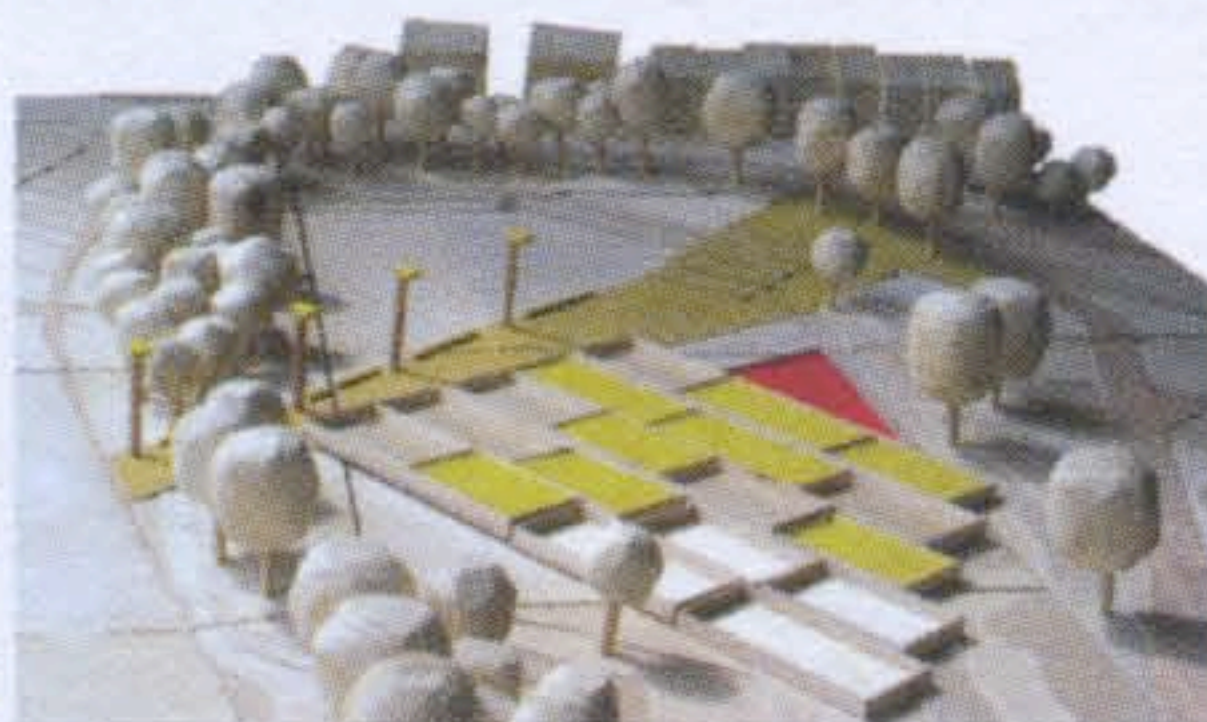


PLUG-IN-PATH AT WOODVALE PARK

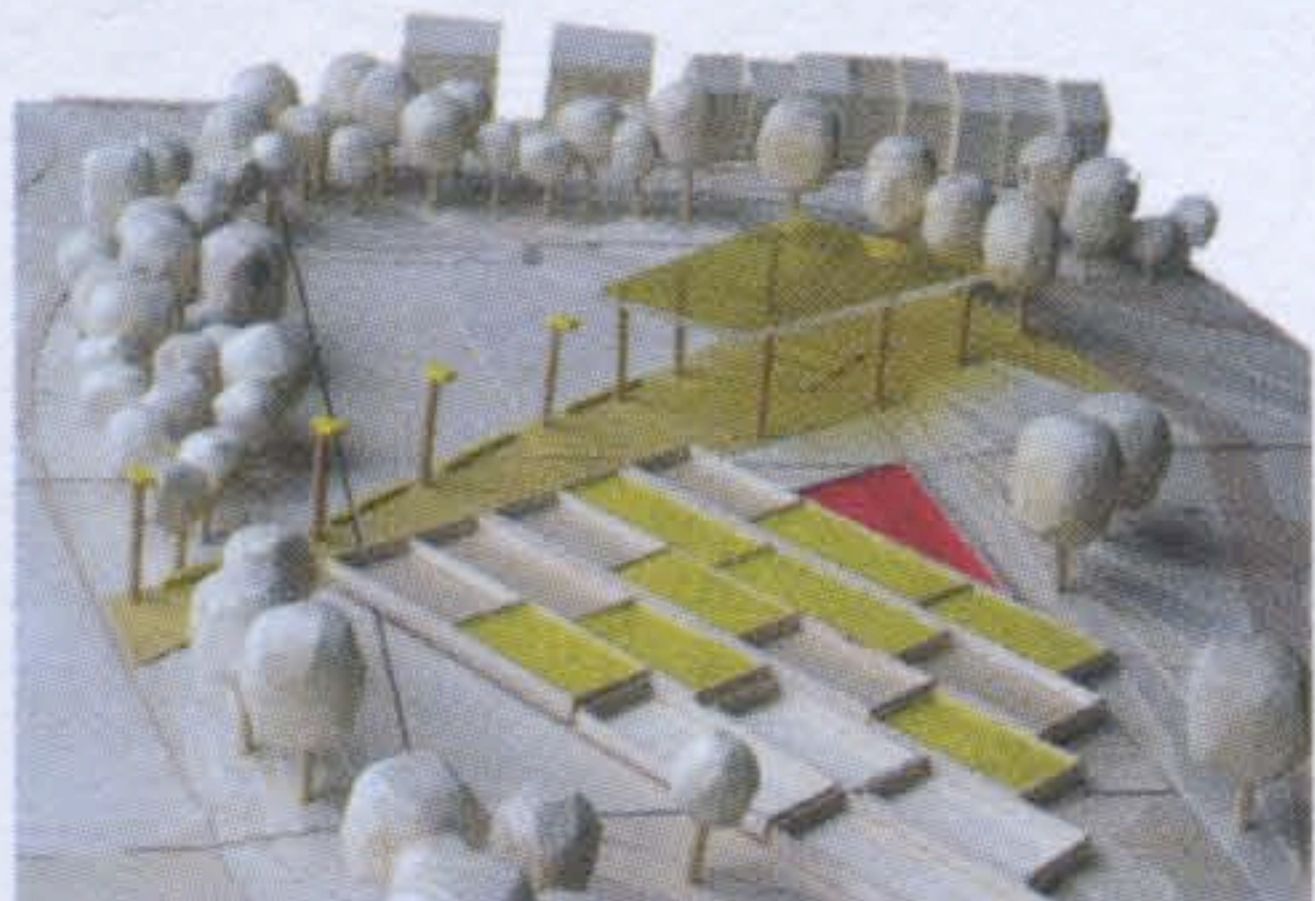
The micro-politics of this process was reflected in the eventual proposal and resulted in a space where social, cultural, and economic spheres overlap. The proposal was a strategy called the "Plug-in-Path" - a programmed surface containing lighting, tiered seating, electricity, and water supplies. Events organisers and participants could "plug in" to these services to support activities like outdoor cinema, concerts, markets, etc. This also allows an incremental development of the site as a number of additional programmes - community gardens, kiosk, large translucent roof, multi-purpose games area, pavilion, etc. - plug-in to this path as funding becomes available. This temporal strategy also allows trust in the project to develop gradually and for it to adapt and respond to changing social dynamics.



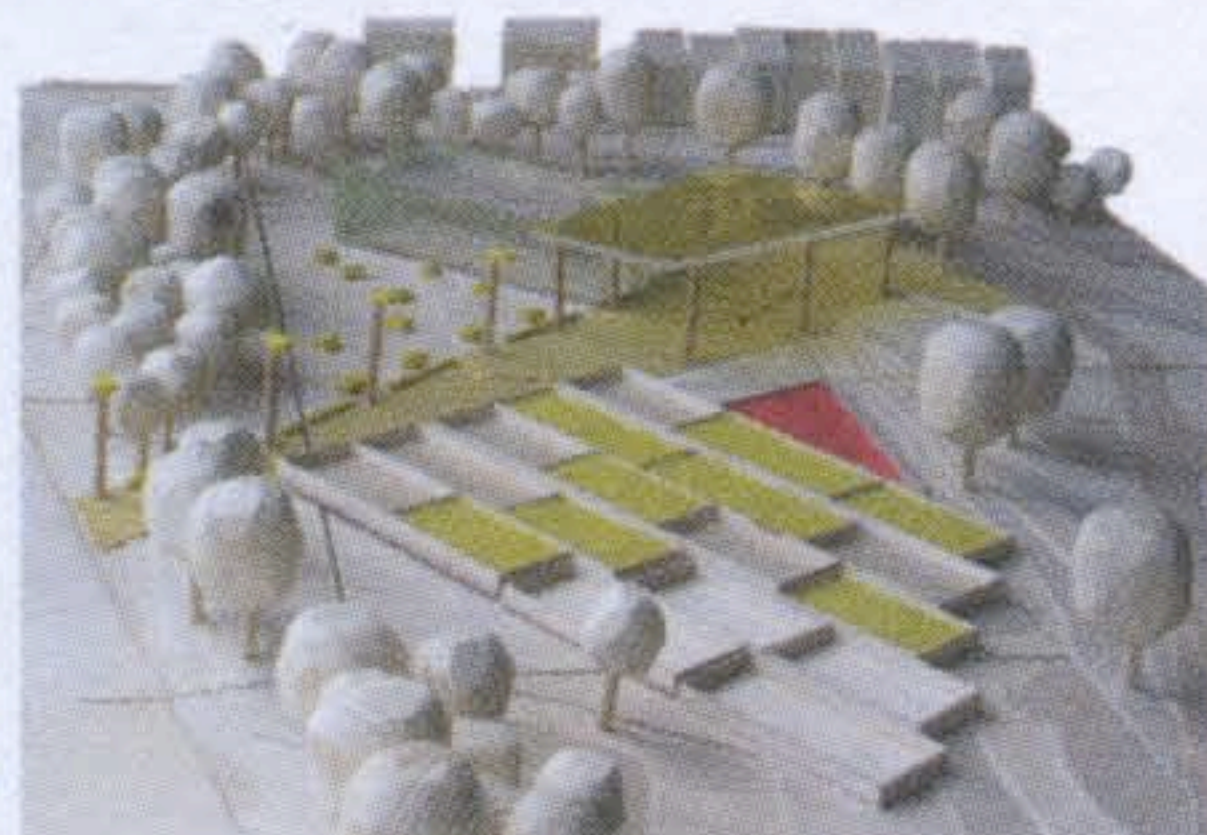
HUB Build-Up: The Plug-In Path



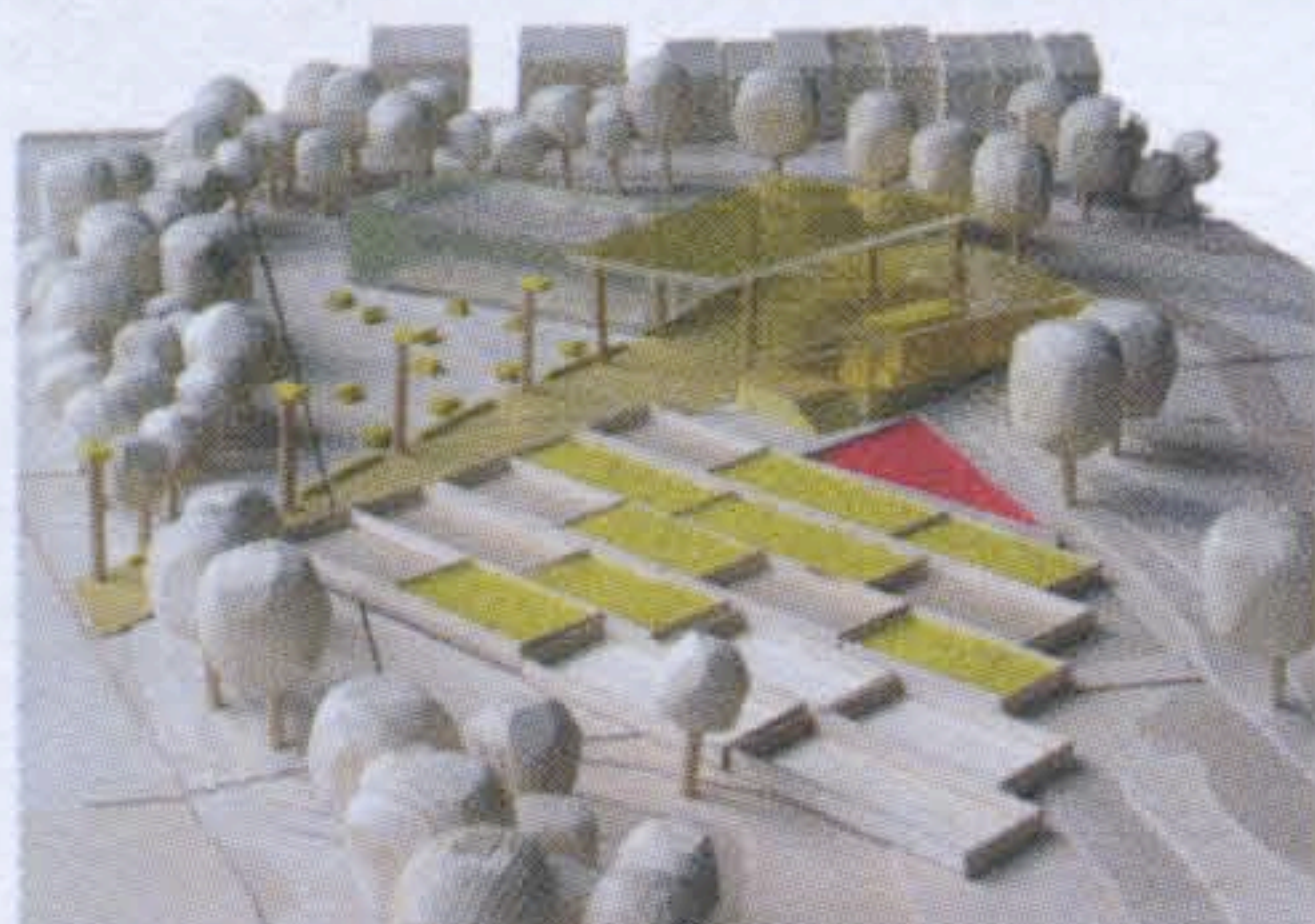
+ Allotments and Toddlers Garden



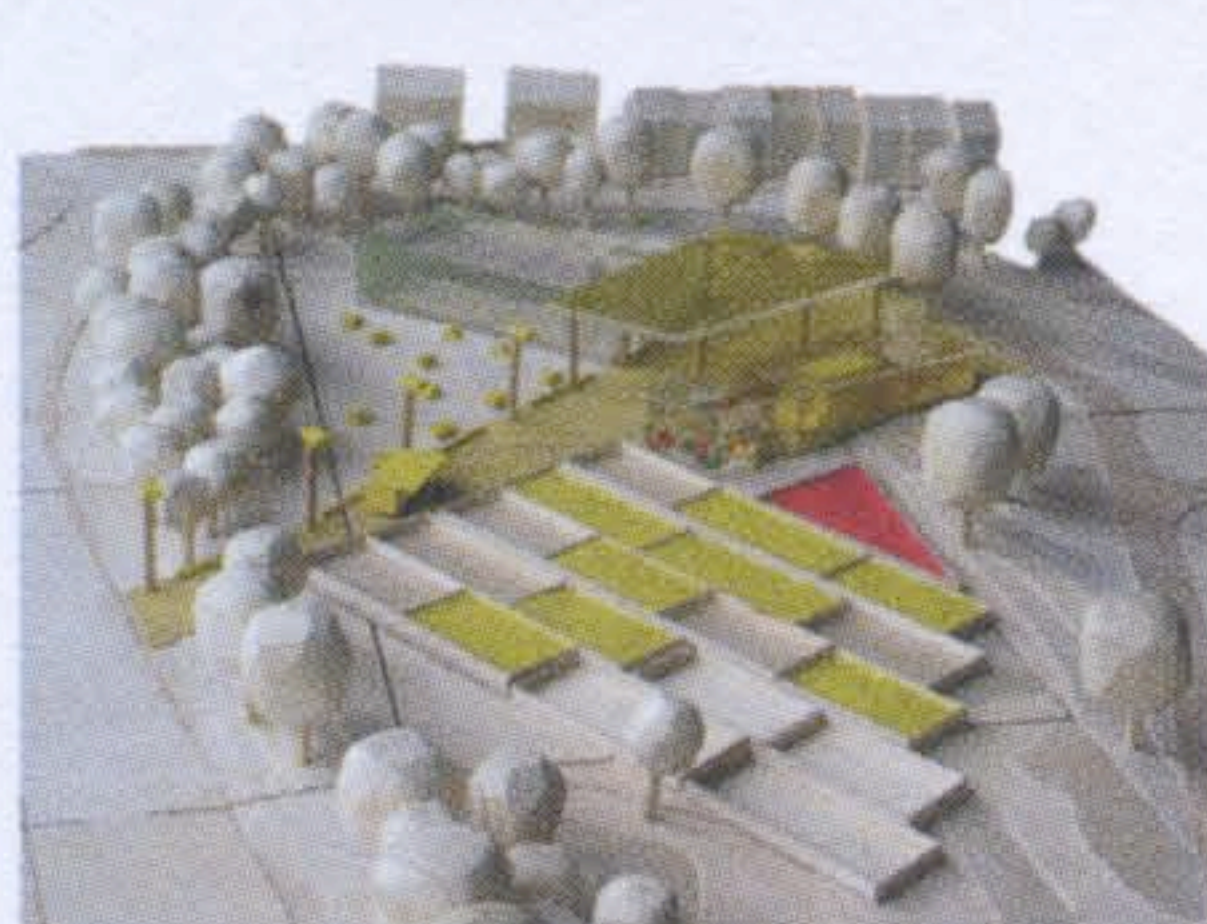
+ The Big Roof



+ Picnic, Table Tennis, Sports Pitch



+ Flexible Building. WCs. Kitchen. etc



+ Kiosk. Soft-Play Space

PLUG-IN PATH AT WOODVALE PARK

AAI Awards entry panels

Hub build-up in 6 stages

Model and plan of Plug-In Path

ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

JENCKS – It's like an ephemeral piece coming from the '60s – even in its name, where ephemerality and uncertainty are the dominant themes, architecturally. If Cedric Price were on this jury, he would be commending this scheme. It does raise an issue, though, about parks and public parks in participation. Here we have an open space, and, through a sequence of moves, the architects have imagined participation in a series of activities – a little toddler there in the red, and then these gardens with allotments and tennis courts and ping pong and other things. So, suddenly, what is an open space fills up with different activities through a very sensitive interaction of the architects with the people. It becomes a kind of '60s participatory, lightweight, ephemeral architecture. And then, presumably, as tastes change and the people change, it becomes disassembled, so it becomes ephemeral parkland, maybe. What it precludes is the very premise that a landscape designer should have some overall imposition of a scheme. There's a presumption here in favour of piecemeal participatory growth, which you can't deny is an option, but it does preclude using the whole space for one thing.

FARRELL – It's about process and collaboration. It's very unusual to come across it in this room. This is the 'before' architectural point where real connection with community might happen. My first reaction was to go "Oh my God!" You have to give yourself time, because it's not sweet in terms of the presentation, but it's quite profound in terms of what it's trying to do, in connection. These are architects and urban planners and communities meeting together, and this is a process that is important to develop. It's on the Shankill Road, and there are lots of other layers claiming the public realm back for pleasure in a city like Belfast. Politically, that's very interesting as well, that people are coming together to claim back the public realm. This project has very high ambition, because it's in the kind of grey zone of nobody really knows what it's going to be like. I think it's very laudable, this kind of process of unknowing and strangers coming together for some sort of greater ambition.

KEAVENEY – For me, this presentation is information overload, and, quite honestly, I can't see the wood for the trees. I find it difficult to read.

McLAUGHLIN – I go along with Yvonne's observations about the positive nature of the process, particularly in the context where it's arisen. I like the statement about how a landscape strategy could "activate the space without the weighty apparatus of traditional space-making". I think that is really, really strong as an intention. But maybe it hasn't got to the stage yet where it is really convincing about what it is making in relation to the park. I think that at the end you feel like you've lost a park rather than gained something, and that there could be another way to integrate the outcome of this process with this park that somehow married them better.

FARRELL – There's a great project by Lina Bobardi in South America, where she designs a church with a football pitch beside it in order that the guys will come to say a few prayers. Sometimes you do need the idea of a passive park in modern terms.

McLAUGHLIN – No, I don't mean passive in that sense. For me, this is more the idea of a strip that you plug into, that somehow that's a kind of abstract that's imported to

the site. I suppose I am interpreting it more in the plug-in sense, the kind of '60s bio-process thing. I think it's interesting and it should be in the exhibition, partly for its pluralism.

JENCKS – Yes. It's the only scheme of its type, isn't it?

DEPLAZES – It's interesting to hear the interpretations of the jury. I don't know about this type of project.

JENCKS – I think that a public participatory park needs a catalyst as well as an intentionality. In other words, the intentions are commendable in a way if you assume a piecemeal process of addition, and that's what it is in the end. They're growing it like a process, an organism, evolving, as the kind of hidden, invisible hand in the market place. But unless you have a kind of catalyst to really make people want to participate, what is going to make them come here?

FARRELL – In modern society, it might be football, or whatever, but it might also be projects where nobody knows what could happen, but you meet on a Monday night because there's something happening here. This is actually community in action. There are always reservations, then, about how something might be made because it's kind of clunky, but you might then say that's okay, it's a formula for connecting. I like the potential for architecture through the process of human interaction.

JENCKS – But is it? That's what I'm asking. When you talk about participation in planning and architecture, you've really got to get the people to participate. There are several methods with which you can do that, but are they really going to come and participate? I wonder, if there isn't something to attract them in the first instance, they won't show up.

FARRELL – There are also allotments here, or you're just going for a walk and you walk across. This project is one of trust. I personally would like to support this as an idea.

JENCKS – As an idea, I would support it. You know there is guerilla gardening, and there are ways of getting people to look after those abandoned sites by going out there and doing it. I'm wondering if the guys behind this project are guerrilla gardeners...

LID ARCHITECTURE – see biog on page 192

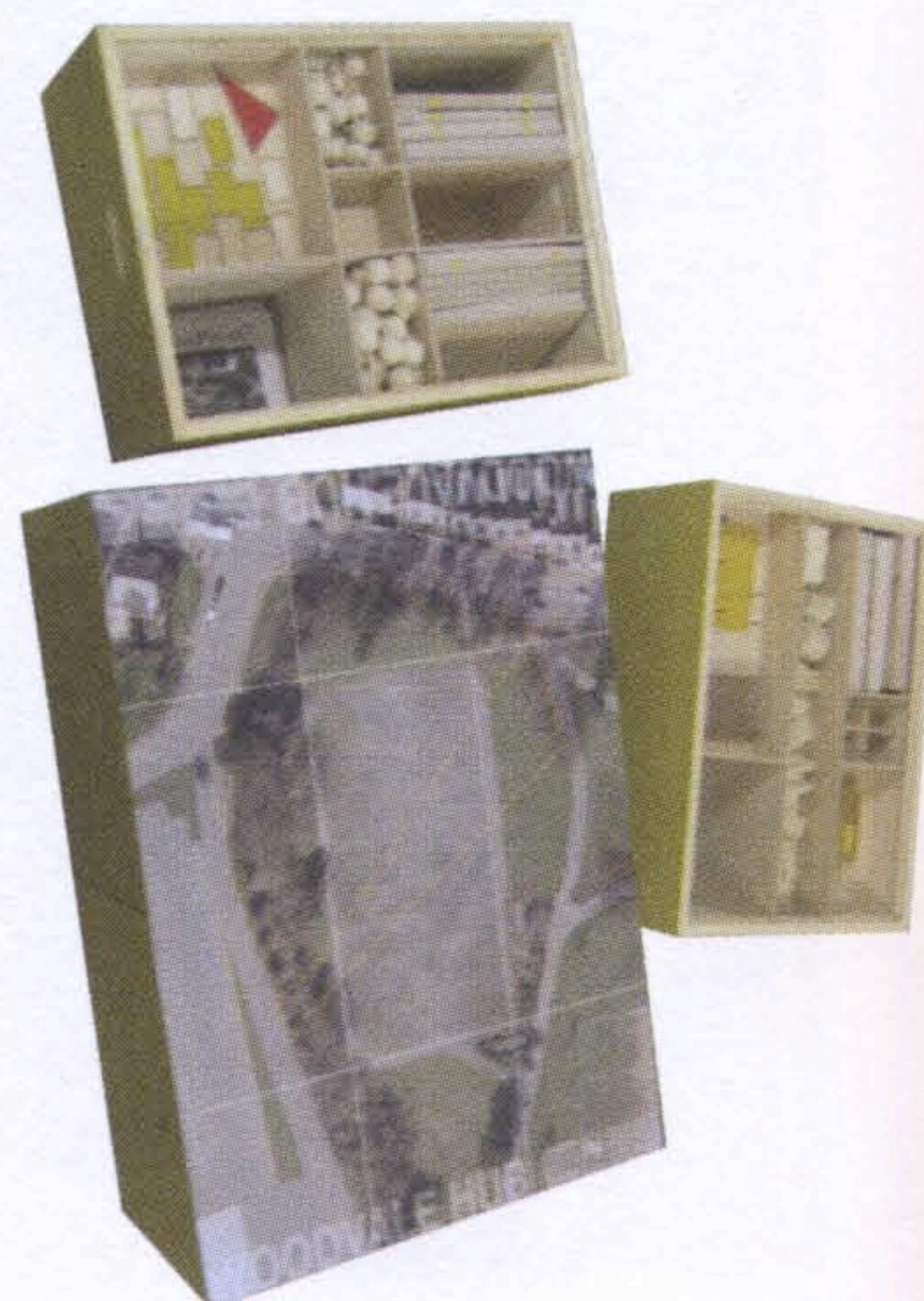
BUILDING INITIATIVE is a group of architects, designers, urban geographers and researchers, based in Berlin, London, and Belfast. Building Initiative uses architecture as a social tool and takes its mandate from close engagement with a wider public.

DESIGN TEAM – Dougal Sheridan, Deirdre McMenamin, Conor Moloney, Joost Beunderman, Peter McNie, Roy Fitzpatrick

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Plug-In Path board game

